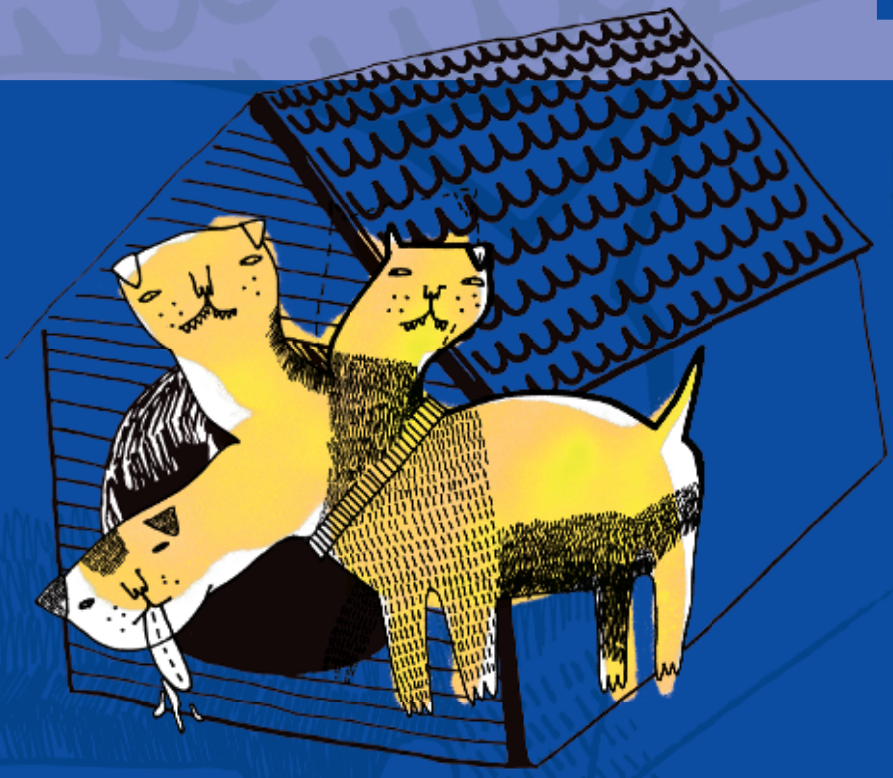
KATARZYNA MARCINIAK (Ed.)

Chasing Mythical Beasts

The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture



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The *Wobo*'s Itinerary: There and Back Again

The present chapter is a report on the experience of our encounters with the mythical creature from East Africa known as the *wobo*. The first encounter took place in childhood, by means of a novel for young readers by Nobel Prize laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz. It was a formative text for many generations in Poland. One hundred years after the publication of the novel we were presented with an opportunity to search for the sources of this myth *in situ*. The evidence gathered has permitted to us to undertake an attempt at following along the way how the memory of a local mythical creature functions in the global culture of the twenty-first century.

From a Polish Formative Novel for Youngsters to East African Mythology

JERZY AXER

1.

In 1911 Polish Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1917) published his only children's book, *W pustyni i w puszczy* [In Desert and Wilderness]. This is a story about two children – fourteen-year-old Polish boy Staś and eight-year-old English girl Nel (Nelly) – who are kidnapped from Faiyum in Egypt in 1885 by supporters of Mahdi, the leader of an anti-British revolt in Sudan, and taken deep into the "Dark Continent", as the Victorians (the nineteenth-century Europeans) used to call Africa. They escape near Fashoda (now Kodok in South Sudan). Alone in the heart of "the desert and wilderness", they make their way south-eastwards in an attempt to reach the Indian Ocean coast. They have many exciting adventures along the way and discover Lake Rudolf (in reality this was done by Sámuel Teleki in 1888; today the lake is known as Lake Turkana) on the border between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. Crossing a desert south-east of the lake, they meet a British expedition exploring the interior of today's Kenya and travel together to Mombasa where their fathers are waiting for them (cf. Fig. 1). The heroic Polish boy goes through an "initiation into manhood", becoming a man aware of his responsibilities.

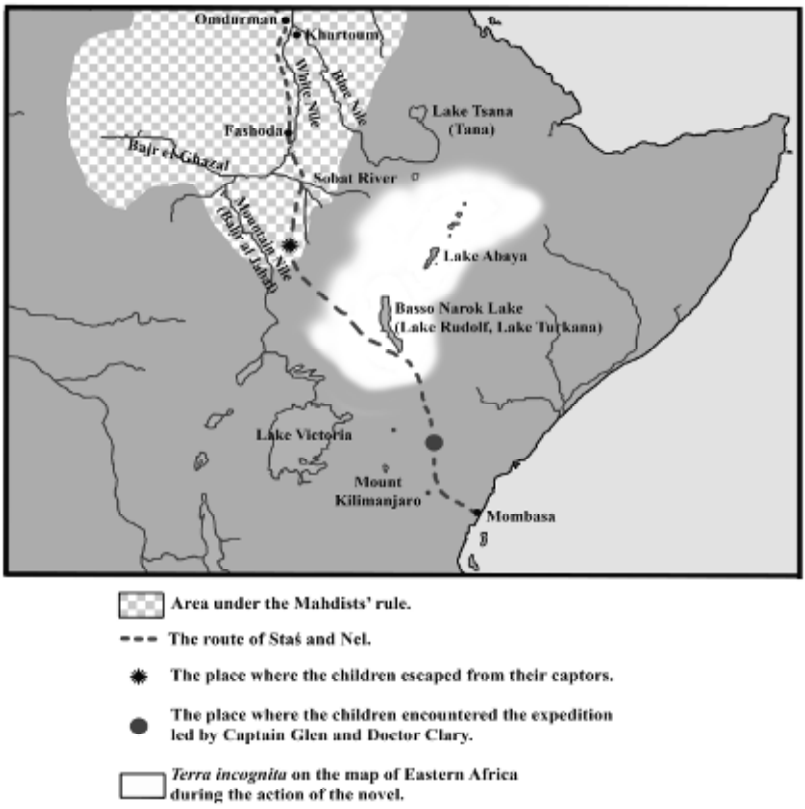

Fig. 1: Africa in the novel *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, map by Robert Przybysz.

For eighty years this was a cult book for Polish children and is required reading at schools to this day. In our imagination, the people and animals from the novel are (or were until recently) part of the stereotype of Africa.

Sienkiewicz drew material for his book from specialist literature and travellers' reports, and also from the experience of his own brief expedition, when he went to Zanzibar and north-eastern Tanganyika (today Tanzania) in 1891. Identifying the sources of his knowledge on geography and nature is not much of a problem. With one exception.

That exception is the mysterious, demonic cat appearing in the book under the name "wobo", described by the author as part lion and part leopard (Sienkiewicz 1967, ch. 38). Things look simple at first glance. Sienkiewicz copied some information almost *verbatim* from the encyclopaedia *La nouvelle*

géographie universelle by Élisée Reclus, published in Paris in 1885. It includes the following passage:

> Un autre fauve, encore plus redouté, est le wobo ou abasambo, que Lefebvre croyait être un loup et qui tiendrait du lion et du léopard: dans toutes les régions d'Éthiopie, les indigènes prétendent avoir aperçu sa robe jaune ou grisâtre rayée de stries noirâtres [...]. (Reclus 1885, vol. 2, 227)

Copying from the encyclopaedia, however, Sienkiewicz not only filled the imaginations of Polish children with a lasting image of this mythical African beast but also – whether he knew it or not – touched on an issue that is still under discussion today: the identity and place of the wobo in the mythology and culture of East African peoples. Reclus in his *Geography* collected the accounts of various travellers who, from the mid-nineteenth century, reported that there was a story going around in Abyssinia about a creature called the wobo. Among others, already in the 1840s a report from the Frenchman Théophile Lefebvre's travels in Abyssinia was published, *Voyage en Abyssinie, exécuté sous le commandement du capitaine Lefebvre pendant les années 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1843*. It contained a list of fauna that included the wobo. Travelling in Ethiopia in the 1850s and 1860s, German-Austrian researcher Martin Theodor von Heuglin heard about a terrible cat called a "wobo" or "mendelit" (1857, 91; 1868, 236; also 1877, vol. II, 57). Finally, Marquis Orazio Antinori, an Italian who travelled across the same area in 1875–1877, also reported the existence of such a creature (1882, 48).

Some time after Reclus published his encyclopaedia, i.e. in the late nineteenth century, one could come across reports from Ethiopia concerning the wobo. I think one especially interesting testimony is that of Alexander Bulatovich, a Russian officer who accompanied the troops of Emperor of Abyssinia Menelik II in his campaigns in the empire's southwestern regions in 1896–1897.[1] This text, published in 1900, contains a direct reference to the wobo:

> Есть особенная порода хищного животного, которого еще никто из европейцев не видал, но абиссинцы и галласы утверждают, что эта порода существует, и что эти звери самые ужасные. Называются они *вобо* или *асамбо*. (Bulatovich 1971, 62)

[1] There are two accounts: *Ot Entoto do reki Baro: Otchët o puteshestvii v iugo-zapadnuiu oblast' Efiopskoi imperii v 1896–97 gg*. (1897) and *S voiskami Menelika II: Dnevnik pokhoda iz Efiopii k ozeru Rudolfa* (1900), published together in Moscow as *S voiskami Menelika II* (1971). It is worth observing that the officer in question became later a monk and is known under his monastery name Antony.

> There is also a peculiar species of predator that no European has ever seen, but Abyssinians and Galla claim it exists and that these animals are the most terrible of all beasts of prey: they are called *wobo* or *asambo*.[2]

Surprisingly, though, in a different context (1971, 116 and 256) Bulatovich uses the name "wobo", or so it appears, to denote a man serving in a military position in Menelik II's army. This meaning of "wobo" is even included in a new Amharic dictionary.

Then suddenly, at the very same time (circa 1900), the wobo completely disappeared from spies' reports and travellers' accounts. No one heard of it, no one saw it, it was not even clear what language the name might have come from.

2.

The wobo did not return until the mid-twentieth century, in a completely different kind of literature: cryptozoology. This is a field of quasi-scientific investigation and mass-cultural art concerned with the world of "unknown animals", in which mysterious cats play a special role. Bernard Heuvelmans (1916–2001) is considered "the father of cryptozoology". His book, *Sur la piste des bêtes ignorées*, published in 1955, was enthusiastically received all over the world.

Whoever was a child at that time will remember that after Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay conquered Mount Everest, the final white spot disappeared from the map of the world and mysterious places were replaced with mysterious beasts: the yeti challenged my generation's imagination just as much as space travel. Thus, cryptozoology developed in parallel to science fiction.

In a book he finished writing in 1989 (although it was not published until 2007, a few years after his death), *Les félins encore inconnus d'Afrique*, Heuvelmans used the name "wobo" and devoted a brief paragraph to the relationship between the names "wobo", "abu sotan", and "abasambo", claiming they were all sourced from informants in Ethiopia (2007, 17–18, cf. 46). The name "wobo" also appears in a work by Karl Shuker, Heuvelmans' successor and a cryptozoology guru, who believes that observations regarding a lion-*cum*-cheetah-*cum*-leopard in East Africa are related to two hypothetical species (2007, 141–142). The first one was allegedly found on the Ugandan--Kenyan border and is called "damasija" (in Kikuyu); Shuker specifies the location of the other as the Ethiopian-Sudanese border and calls it "wobo" (believing the name to be Amharic) or "mendelit" (allegedly a Tigre word).

The wobo has had the right of citizenship in the world of cryptozoology ever since (cf. Eberhart 2002, 592). Paradoxically, Sienkiewicz's novel became one of the academic sources involved in this whole affair. Michel Reynal announced on the Internet that he had made a "literary discovery" of the wobo in a novel by

[2] Working English translation. Also this mention matches the reports of Bulatovich's predecessors and the definition of Reclus, see above, n. 1.

"famous Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz". Therefore, the book became "a literary contribution to cryptozoology" (Reynal 2008).

3.

Within today's Tsavo National Park (east of Mount Kilimanjaro), people have nurtured the memory of the Ghost and the Darkness, two lions that killed over a hundred construction workers building a railway line from Mombasa to Uganda. These demonic lions "operated" in 1898; newspapers were full of reports about them. A legend began to emerge. A book by Colonel John H. Patterson, a British big-game hunter and sportsman who ultimately killed both lions, *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo and Other East African Adventures* was published in 1907. In fact, the American President Theodore Roosevelt's famous 1910 hunting expedition along the new railway line from Mombasa to Albertville was provoked by Patterson's report and was widely commented upon in the press at the time when Sienkiewicz started writing *In Desert and Wilderness*. The publicity the lion story gained during the time that *In Desert and Wilderness* was being written creates an interesting context for how the Abyssinian motif of the wobo appeared in the Kenyan setting of the novel.

Thus, in 2007, as I was standing with my wife Anna on the bridge across the Tsavo River near where those lions had killed the largest number of labourers (allegedly seventy-nine, and according to Kenyan patriots, they only chose Indians and left the natives alone), I thought I had solved the mystery of the wobo. I came to the conclusion that by exploiting the myth of the demonic feline from Ethiopia, Sienkiewicz had acted like a proper reporter: he referenced the legend of the man-eating lions on the Tsavo River, popularized in the media in 1907–1910. In killing the wobo, the heroic young boy from Sienkiewicz's novel performed the same deed that had made Colonel Patterson famous, more or less in the same place. And that was how the Abyssinian wobo gained citizenship of Kenya.[3]

4.

Meanwhile, a hundred years later, suddenly field researchers again encountered the wobo. In the same area where nineteenth-century travellers had most often heard stories about the wobo, the wobo itself appeared to these researchers in a completely new form.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s the neo-Marxist scholar Donald L. Donham conducted research in an Ethiopia upended by the communist revolu-

[3] Another branch of myths about mysterious beasts in Kenya involves stories about the Nandi Bear, an echo of the Nandi people's anti-British resistance in 1890–1906. However, neither these mythical creatures nor similar, more feline ones were ever called wobo. Even during the Mau-Mau Uprising (1953–1955) the insurgents referenced stories of demonic felines ("Leopard Man").

tion, studying the Maale community. He published some fascinating analyses of changes in the system of power and rituals of this small tribe (today having approximately 95,000 members) living in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region north of Lake Turkana (Donham 1985). One of the special features of the structure of power that he described was the *ashtime* ritual, which he interpreted as evidence that the third gender functioned in this community (Donham 1985; cf. also Epprecht 2006). Anthropologists differ in their views on the function of people fulfilling the role of *ashtime* and their significance in the structure of power. The view that these were transgender people (individuals assigned male at birth) fulfilling the role of bisexual transvestites (Epprecht 2006) collides with the opinion that these were men under the special care of Maale kings, playing an important role in the nation's ritual life as the sexual partners of future kings, protecting them from being contaminated by intercourse with a woman.

The most important thing for our discussion, however, is that during his research Donham found an informant among the Maale who introduced himself as follows:

> The Divinity created me wobo, crooked. If I had been a man, I could have taken a wife and begotten children. If I had been a woman, I could have married and borne children. But I am wobo; I can do neither. (Donham 1999, 106; cf. Murray 1998, 5–6)

Donham saw him as a transvestite and living testimony of *ashtime*. He translated the word "wobo" as "crooked" and decided that it described transvestism ("neither man nor woman"). In the context of gender identity and transgenderism issues, based on this sole testimony wobo became a *terminus technicus* in the discussion on the third gender (like *hijras* in India, cf. Reddy 2005). It is worth noting that Donham's informant said he was an exception at that moment, but there had been more like him at one time. Thus, the term "wobo" functions in the Maale language, but not as a borrowing from Amharic.[4]

5.

Like most people of my generation, I first met the wobo in early childhood:

> Nel was standing under a *kusso* bush [...]. The pink blossoms she'd dropped out of fear lay at her feet, and twenty-something steps away a huge, tawny-grey beast was crawling towards her through the low grass [...]. With a single glance he [Staś

[4] Azeb Amha from the African Studies Centre, Leiden University, whom I consulted, says that no such word exists in Amharic. This means that information identifying the word as being Amharic is based solely on the speculations of the nineteenth-century travellers.

> – J. A.] saw a dark spot near the animal's ear, aimed the barrels of his shotgun at it in one light movement and fired.[5]

You do not ask what a wobo is in a situation like that. The picture painted by Sienkiewicz is enough: a terrifying beast endangering someone dear to you; a component of the personal and at the same time collective mythology of a Polish child. For some people, when time passes and their childhood becomes a *locus amoenus* – a paradise lost forever (and childhood books are the only effective way for such people to meet their own selves from the past) – only then might they think of trying to identify the species of that mysterious animal. For me, an additional incentive came from experiencing nature in Kenya, from my attempt repeated over the years to make my childhood dream of being in the middle of the world from the novel come true.

For fifteen years my wife and I have made regular trips to Kenya. Because we were both brought up on *In Desert and Wilderness*, it was completely natural that we asked everyone around us, very naively, if they had not seen a wobo. We asked hotel receptionists, Samburu and Maasai warriors serving as *askari* in nature reserves, naturalists in Mombasa and museum employees in Nairobi. It was all in vain, no one had heard anything. That is, until summer 2014 when we met a tracker, a safari guide whom we shall call Jacob, in Tsavo West. When we asked him if he had heard about the wobo, he answered, "No, but I have to ask my grandfather who knows many strange things".

Jacob kept his promise, and his grandfather told him to ask us, "Why are they interested?". A few months later we met with Jacob's Grandpa. The noble old man, or *mzee*, turned out to be an émigré from Ethiopia who (with a group of political refugees) had crossed the Kenyan border sometime around 1930 as a nine-year-old boy who was then a convent-school pupil. He had some information about the cult of the wobo, he just did not know if he could trust us enough to tell us more about it. That is how we began discovering the alternative history of the wobo.

6.

We planned our work together with Jan Kieniewicz.[6] The scope and character of our search was largely determined by the fact that we were sure we had encountered a community of political refugees living among foreigners, strongly dispersed across the desert regions of the Ethiopian-Sudanese-Kenyan borderland and keeping their activities hidden, in constant fear of being exposed. This meant it was impossible to organize a professional team to study that community. If we did not want to destroy it, all we could do was register the stories that –

[5] Working translation from Sienkiewicz (1967, ch. 39).

[6] See the second part of the present chapter. Our thanks go to Maria Wiśniewska and Donald W. Harward for their support.

encouraged by our questions – its members would be willing to tell us through various middlemen who were not part of the "inner circle". Therefore, we decided to obtain as much narrative information as possible, guaranteeing its authors complete anonymity and not trying to make direct contact with them. We accepted the hypothesis that we were studying a closed community cultivating a very old origin myth or one that was relatively recent and elaborated for our benefit.

Over the past four years we gathered successive versions, crumbs, and echoes of this myth, which came to us distorted by the mediation of multiple translations between tribal languages, Amharic, Swahili, and English. We did not try to inquire about logical and temporal connections. Our question as to what the wobo was (had been) led – quite unexpectedly for us – to the stories multiplying. They transformed before our very eyes, crystallizing and then dissolving again.

At first these were obvious traces of memories of persecution in Ethiopia, the destruction of convents and killing of monks; it was possible to associate them with events that followed the death of Menelik II, but the strongest association was with the consolidation of power by the future Emperor Haile Selassie in 1928–1930. The killing of itinerant reciters/storytellers might also have been an echo of the Italian occupation after 1935. Information about family relationships, contacts between the eldest members of the group also ran through the stories, and props appeared (a bangle with the image of a lion, icons, manuscripts written in Ge'ez). Soon, however, the stories ceased to be governed by historical time; all historical references from the period after the beginning of Menelik II's reign disappeared. On the other hand, there appeared multiple references to the ancient culture of the Nile Valley, figures reminiscent of those from the Faras frescos, Nubian gods, artefacts were replaced with references to the Ark of the Covenant, and the lion of Judah. With time, also the character of the stories changed: the narrative was no longer broken and incoherent, it became more complex, visions were painted more and more boldly. It seemed to us at first that the word wobo meant someone capable of turning into an animal, some kind of shaman warrior. Later wobo mainly started to signify the entire cult – an ancient cult brought from the depths of time and allegedly dying with the last generation of storytellers trained a hundred years earlier.

We were aware that such an unfiltered stream of narrative also carried with it material completely alien to African culture, processed patterns from nineteenth- and twentieth-century European culture: popular novels as well as films. The more they wanted to talk about themselves, the stronger must have been the temptation to reach for this kind of prosthesis. We were especially thinking of the books by Edgar Rice Burroughs and their screen versions (e.g., *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*, 1916) and by Arthur Conan Doyle (*The Lost World*, 1912). Such borrowings already appeared in the winter of 2014, and their number continued to grow.

Reality has exceeded our expectations. The latest package from January 2018 (over 80 pages of handwritten descriptions of meetings and records of conversations) shows an openly literary character. It is a collage making use of texts that were extremely popular over a hundred years ago (83 million copies, translations into 44 languages), namely the novels of H. Rider Haggard: *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and especially *She* (1886/1887) and *Ayesha, the Return of She* (1905); today they are easily accessible online.

7.

We have come full circle. We started from literary fiction created by a great Polish writer who aimed to provide the young generation of a nation without a state, i.e. Poland before 1918, with a model of courage and patriotism. As we sought a hundred years later to find traces of the story from Africa that had inspired Sienkiewicz when he was building his image of the demonic wobo, we caused quasi-mythical narratives to appear in response to our questions. They were ultimately articulated – in the belief that this form would be the easiest for us to accept – through another novel also written over a century ago: the story of a lost African civilization produced by a Victorian writer travelling across Africa and fascinated by its mythical past.

The story of the wobo thus returned to us as a narrative that our local informant Jacob (who had no formal education) embedded into a work that was fundamental for a separate type of fantasy novel: one describing lost worlds and peoples. Jacob introduced himself and his grandfather as characters into that story and gave the role of the high priestess of the cult of the wobo to the central character in Haggard's novels. Her name is *She Who Must Be Obeyed*. This character's impact on contemporary literature cannot be overestimated. Variations are found in Rudyard Kipling, in C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in J. R. R. Tolkien – and in both an evil and a good incarnation (Shelob and Galadriel). It can be found in the screenplay for *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and in *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019). It is also worth mentioning that Freud and Jung have analyzed the She character.

And that is how, for our benefit, today the descendent of 1930s Ethiopian refugees has incidentally placed the myth of the wobo originating from "mysterious Africa" within the mass-cultural world of myths created by European narratives of the fantasy genre.

Nevertheless, perhaps under that layer of Victorian prose some incarnation of the wobo still lies concealed, someone excluded from the community by his (or her) own volition, having the power to transform into a warrior. Namely, in December 2017, when we asked a lovely young Maale woman accompanying Jacob during a meeting with us what the wobo was, she said it was also the name of "the one who steals goats from the rich at night to give them to the poor". Surely this is some kind of incarnation of Sienkiewicz's wobo that attacked people and animals in villages in feline form, completely different from what Jacob has

presented to us so far. And what do we do with the information that in Maale 'wóbbò' translates as 'lame'/'handicapped', while in the language of another Ethiopian people (Wolaytta) a similar word, 'wóbbo', has a similar meaning – 'someone who cannot walk, is handicapped'?[7] The Wolaytta people were being conquered by Menelik II when Bulatovich – who was with Menelik's troops at the time – wrote about the wobo.[8] Is there any connection between the word 'wóbbò' and a word describing a person with non-human abilities?

There is no doubt in my mind that there are many incarnations that the wobo could assume in the past, the present, and the future.

From East African Post-Colonial Tale, Back to a Formative Novel

JAN KIENIEWICZ

1.

During our quest for the wobo we came upon our own tracks, just as if we were Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet (Milne 1926, ch. 3: "Pooh and Piglet Go Hunting and Nearly Catch a Woozle"). This was not, however, a surprise success, as from the outset we had been interested in our own identity. Being engaged in a search for the wobo's identity, this quest ran parallel to the search for our own identity, as well. For the question elicited from a colonial spirit struck us with a reality that was essentially post-colonial. In my opinion, the result turned out to be worth all the efforts.

Who were we in this quest? Who are we today? This was an important experience for each of us. The first step was that of having become aware that our task was not only about tracking down the sources of certain themes in the novel by Sienkiewicz. The wobo, after all, was a part of our imagination.

In Desert and Wilderness truly shaped us. Being aware of this, we nonetheless did not fully grasp the consequences of the actions we were undertaking, nor did we grasp their impact on us. It seemed that we had found the mysterious wobo, and Jerzy Axer then told us in detail during the conference about all the ramifications of that. Yet in the meantime certain events took place, ones that induced us to delve much further. This happened as a consequence of finding in the course of our search items, stories, myths, and living people for whom wobo was not a character from the novel.

2.

In the beginning we had the impression that we had come across a shadow of tradition which carried us far, far back – perhaps even to the times of Ancient Egypt. Later, however, curiosity – we might say "desire" – compelled us on-

[7] Information provided by Azeb Amha in a letter from March 26, 2018, cf. above, n. 4.

[8] See above, n. 1.

ward, until we found ourselves again in the "heart of darkness". As a result, our quest to establish the wobo's identity, compelled us to look deep into the history of the entire region. Not only the area where Sienkiewicz had set his novel, but in Ethiopia as well. We seized on every trace with passionate readiness to press on ahead, heedless of the risk. Not always were we mindful that we were pursuing a path blazed by many generations of seekers deceived by their own imaginations. That we were conjuring up seemingly forgotten phantom dreams.

Today, taking a sober glance back at that experience, I discern not only the mechanism of succumbing to illusions, but also the proclivity I know well of shaping images of an alien world in accordance with deeply-rooted habits. I knew this – I had even written about it (Kieniewicz 1984) – but I tried not to permit scepticism. Being mindful of this, I nonetheless suppose that the tale of grandpa is as real as every other family tale. And this allows me to situate it in a long series of probable events.

Our searches for the wobo led us to the cult of Apedemak, the god of war and fertility in ancient Nubia. We encounter Apedemak in human form but with a lion's head, and also as one having three heads and four arms (Nel 2001). We had not intended to launch such wide-ranging research. Moreover, a significant part of this history is well known; it has an enormous bibliography that covers the religious aspects of Ancient Egypt, Nubia, Meroe, Kush, along with the processes of the area's Christianization and Islamization. The Christian temples in Faras, and also of Dongola, the Middle Age kingdoms of Nobatia and Makuria, are included in this history. In Naqa, in the ancient Meroe kingdom, the temple of Apedemak, the god with a lion's head, stood beside the temple of Amun (Žabkar 1975). We are aware of the exquisiteness of these cultures, ones which ultimately fell under the blows of the Bedouins and Mamluks in historical times. The great heritage of Polish researchers on Nubia, not only our archaeologists, is worth mentioning in this context (Ochała 2014; Drzewiecki 2016).

For our search it is also important that a form of deity – one connected to fertility, water, and power – was connected to India. Among the matters that indicate this is his form when the god becomes a snake with a lion's head. We know that an important trade and communication route leads from the Nile River to the Red Sea coast, and further across the Indian Ocean to India and Kashmir. I would argue that this is an important motif in our reconstruction – that is, the connection with the Indian Ocean (Haaland 2014). This snake-like and many--armed embodiment, which reminds us of the goddess Kali's incarnations, seems to be even more crucial when we bear in mind that it is the snake that protects the object of the cult. It was an Indian tradition that made snakes protectors of treasure. Wobo, as a snake, also protects items which have a magical meaning.

Jerzy Axer has shown how a tale elicited by our quest transformed into a "literary" account intended to satisfy our curiosity. Does this mean the Ethiopian myth moulded from Kenyan clay is also an illusion? I would not say so. Rather,

I submit that it is not an illusion, for even if I cannot verify it, I do deem it a useful tool.

3.

And so we faced a fundamental challenge: how to continue our quest for the wobo and how to treat our involvement. My proposal leads towards writing another novel. That would have spelled a return to the starting point, to children's literature as a formative tool, as a key to reality. We would thereby avoid immersing ourselves in a hopeless attempt to master the knowledge of several disciplines and learning covering two millennia of peoples' fates on the vast sweep of northeast Africa. The proposal to follow Sienkiewicz's example does not mean capitulating; rather it is a proposal to shift the registers of cognition that suit the changes in our identity that had resulted from searching for the wobo. For no matter what we hold true today about the information conveyed to us, it is obvious to me that we encountered the trace of events with the power to give rise to myths. It turned out that under the influence of our venture, a narrative appeared – that the tale became the consequence of an awakening. A former colonial wrote us back, as if we were representatives of the colonizers, which only confirms the conviction that none of us is without guilt.[9] Our posture vis-à--vis that "back package", a sort of return message, may of course vary, but in keeping with the rules of the game it should be a novel. The construction of a novel's narrative becomes an answer to a colonial situation, and this is not an entrance into a postcolonial arrangement, as is the case with the attempt at scholarly deconstruction.

This should be a traditional tale, although it of course can have a modern form. It should take up the same formative motif, i.e. the universal problem of forming character. However, differently than with Sienkiewicz, the answer should not focus on the white man. Differently than with the *oeuvre* of H. Rider Haggard and Pierre Benoit,[10] nor at the centre of our attention do we find the revenge of a coloured woman on a man (cf. Dawidowicz 2009). The postcolonial context of our experience is expressed in the choice of the same literary convention – namely, the adventure tale. The attempt to meet that challenge – i.e. the confrontation of expectations with the character of the "back package" – will rest with the manner of carrying this out.

4.

The novel *Amanda: The Girl Who Needs to Be Listened To* would have a simple plot. A young girl, passionate about photography, dreaming of a career as an archaeologist, during her internship in the field at Lake Turkana, decides to par-

[9] The idea comes from Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002); cf. Łukaszyk and Skórczewski (2016, 87–103 and 119–145).

[10] Pierre Benoit, a French author of similar literature a generation younger. His *Atlantide* (1919) was at its time as popular as Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885).

ticipate in an expedition seeking a mysterious chest that had belonged to her family for generations. Her father worked in the Marakwet Heritage Project and had never mentioned anything about their great, royal past. The initiator of her endeavour was the centenarian great-grandmother of Amanda, who saw in the young girl a personality similar to her own, and who wished to pass on the family tradition and the mysteries related to it. On the way north to the cave that safeguarded the treasure left during the family's flight from Ethiopia eighty years earlier, the heroine not only matures into her role, but conducts a retrospection into the tradition passed on to her. She wishes to understand what it means that she is to become Wobo, the one to whom people must be obedient.

The road down from Lake Turkana led them through Gamu-Gofa, Kaffa, Illubabor, Weloga, and Gojjam to the upper stretch of the Blue Nile – to Gondor. The old wooden chest, protecting the ritual objects hidden in some cave from unauthorized eyes, remains under the protection of a snake. The snake knows who can open the chest. Amanda experiences adventures, overcomes difficulties and dangers, and eventually comes back with the treasure, but remains uncertain of her fate. Insofar as the way *to* was an adventure, the way back became a drama for the heroine. She encountered in it a young person whom she did not love, although that person had saved her. She also met an old person whom she trusted, although he betrayed her. She then experiences the death of her great-grandmother and finds out things about herself that she had never anticipated. There will be no happy ending.

I intentionally give a title that paraphrases the term 'She' from the title of Haggard's tale and the story of Jacob. The response to the "back package" is not to be a caricature, an inversion of postcolonial paradigms. It is also important for me that, in meeting a postcolonial response halfway, all the parties involved find a common ground. What I intend is a transgression of the realm within which not only tradition, but also postcolonial convention encloses the heroine.

The fable is but the tale's skeleton. Fleshing it out with some story about cultural phenomena, about African syncretisms filtered through European science is nothing difficult. The challenge is to construct a believable figure and premise that gets to today's recipient. Who will write this tale, and for whom? One would like to imagine that it will not be either colonial or postcolonial, and that it will all the while retain the magic with which the Polish Nobel Prize winner imbued his own tale.

5.

The things we struggle to find out about concern the process of passing on tradition, its message, and the relations between objects, texts, and words. The things we are supposed to have discovered so far indicate the gradual transformation of a religious message into a kind of magic. My understanding stands as follows: in the lands of Nubia a syncretism had taken place, one connecting the old lion-god with Christianity. Before the end of the fourteenth century, the descendants of Apedemak's worshippers had to abandon their Nubian homelands and together

with the remaining Christians seek shelter in the lands of Ethiopia. No doubt it was there, again in consequence of internal tensions and external dangers, that the cult eventually took the form of a convent or a secret sect centred around a figure capable of magical transformation. This group gained influence, significance, and wealth. Here I leave out several centuries of Ethiopian history. What is probable and important is that Haile Selassie's ascension to power forced the handful of this sect's adherents to flee. Outside their country and in isolation from magical artefacts, these people lost their sense of purpose. They believe they preserved their powers, however, they did not have an environment where their powers could operate. That is how things might have been, and in such soil a mythology of refugees fleeing to Kenya might have taken shape, of people powerless vis-à-vis the implacable processes of assimilation. The appearance in Jacob's accounts of elements borrowed from European adventure tales did not change my conviction that that is how things might have been. I make this the tale's truth, and in this truth I build a space for encounter.

6.

In approaching a conclusion, my view is that in the process whereby this supposed or invented cult transformed into a magical practice, the way it connected the concept of a god to an actual, existing animal changed. Typically, it was a genuinely existing animal that provided the form for the mythical figure of a god. Here it was different. Nor does the matter end here. Indeed, it was magic, regardless of whether it was conducted by a shaman or any other person crucial for the community's bond, that led to the emergence of the wobo. The wobo (man or woman) donned an arbitrary form, that of an animal or a chimaera, and in this way manifested its bond with the god – or perhaps his or her own divinity. For it is not certain just what this ancient Nubian cult transformed into over those two thousand years, nor how it adapted the Christian imaginarium to its own needs. Man or woman (bearing in mind the matrilineal train of thought), he or she already was or was only becoming the wobo, a figure beyond identification, whether in the human or animal world.

That was the reason for why the wobo was heard far and wide, but no one saw him (or her). Those who searched for it connected the wobo to various animals, ones they would even kill, make trophies out of them, or the opposite – they would attribute to them the role of fighters for freedom. This once popular story, perhaps sowed purposely, for a long time now has been treated as an oddity. In my opinion the Wobo, intentionally written with a capital letter, was not the incarnation of a human in an existing animal. It was also not a real human, not a man, nor a woman, but a *sui generis* avatar, a many-character form expressing the power of the divine. The power necessary to sustain the community which, however small or limited, struggled, sometimes successfully, to assure itself influence or even domination over society.

In my opinion, the transformation process of the cult, the shaping of the tradition that assured the distinctiveness of the newcomers' group, is what had the

crucial meaning in all of this. In this process, tradition converted into magic that was to sustain the integrity of the group without exposing it to conflict with the environment. It became a tool protecting the community from escalating external pressures. The secret had to be entrusted to people from beyond the sphere of the officially accepted religion. Those introduced to the secret, the guardians of tradition, obtained special powers. As I understand the things we succeeded in finding, one special power concerned taking on the form of animals. But as I said: the Wobo is the He or She having this power at their disposal. There is no wobo animal, there are only imagined animals more or less alike this incarnation. I wish to say that the statement "I am wobo" or "She is wobo" means the ability of adopting a form which is outstanding in its singularity, and therefore neither human nor animal.

7.

No living person has seen a wobo, but nonetheless we managed to discover an animal fitting people's perceptions of how the wobo looked in the times of Sienkiewicz. Yet we did not content ourselves here. The reconstruction of the search for the animal was only the beginning of our path. We then sent Amanda, the novel's character, out on a further expedition, now endowed with our knowledge and hunches, but autonomous in her choices.

To say anything about this, we have to find ourselves inside. In order to understand, I should become a Wobo. That is of course impossible. That is why I propose a novel narrative. Delving into the identity of the Kenyan girl may well also be a fool's errand, but it fits within rationality.

This is why I said that seeking the Wobo's identity causes us to reflect on the identity of the prospectors. And I point out a solution which shows us a telltale return to the starting point. The opportunity for this is created by children's literature, its magic, fantasy, and imagination. I will not follow the wobo's trail up the Blue Nile, to Lake Tana, in order to delve into the world of medieval Ethiopia, its temples, chronicles, into the confusion of caves and mysteries. But the novel? This is the appropriate tool for such a crazy endeavour. Hence, I think that by offering a hypothesis about the identity of Wobo as a person who becomes someone both not human and not animal – so who, exactly? – I can also point out the new identity of its prospectors, an identity more childish, definitely quarrelsome, one open to the magic of the unknown and to the marvellous.

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